



The Czech 2010 Elections: Beginning of a New Political Era?

David Král

- *The outcome of the Czech parliamentary elections can be viewed as an earthquake on the Czech political scene.*
- *Two major parties, conservative Civic Democrats (ODS) and leftist Social Democrats (CSSD), lost massively compared to the previous elections.*
- *Two new parties, right-wing TOP09 and centrist Public Affairs (Věci veřejné, VV) secured unexpectedly high outcomes – 16.7% for TOP09 and 10.9% for VV.*
- *Two political parties that were represented in the current Chamber of Deputies, the Christian Democrats (KDU-CSL) and the Green Party (SZ) remained under the 5% threshold for entry into the parliament. The Communist Party lost its traditional position of the third most represented party.*
- *Four party leaders resigned immediately after the announcement of results, as well as the Prague ODS leader, Lord Mayor Pavel Bem. "Change" and "the beginning of a new political era" are the slogans most frequently used in Prague by commentators. However, whether the election actually means a real shift in the Czech political scene and political culture yet remains to be seen.*
- *The centre – right coalition of ODS, TOP09 and VV is the likely executive outcome, despite the fact that the President might ask the election winner (CSSD) to attempt to form the cabinet.*
- *The most important task for the coalition government will be to introduce austerity measures aimed at decreasing the structural budget deficit and stop the raising public debt. This will likely be complemented by the pension and healthcare reforms. Implementation of anti-corruption measures will be an important part of the agenda.*

Why the big parties lost massively: the Social Democrats and the ODS

The outcome of the elections is largely interpreted as a failure of Social Democrats. Despite of having received most votes, they fared far worse than originally expected. All the opinion polls published shortly before the voting were putting their support at around 30% and at least 10% ahead of the Civic Democrats. Thus the actual outcome came as a huge blow to the party leader Jiri Paroubek, who resigned from party leadership immediately after the official results were announced.

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.... Schwarzenberg is the party's face, while its brain is Miroslav Kalousek, former minister of finance and runaway from Christian Democrats. He was also the main construct beyond the party's campaign, focused on swift introduction of austerity measures, reducing structural budget deficit and timely implementation of the pension reform.

Many see the main reason for this failure in his personality using overly self-confident, arrogant and populist style of campaign, focusing on "ordinary citizens" and promising the maintenance of the current generous social benefits, including some gestures such as paying the 13th pension from the profit of CEZ, the biggest largely state-owned energy company. Also, his possible alliance with the communists, either explicit or silent, was one of the reasons for concern among many voters who might be inclined more towards the left. The third reason was a total inability to address young people, especially the first-time voters. CSSD is very unsuccessful in recruiting young people for membership, and its programme had very little to offer to this age group. The polls suggest that only 9% of first-time voters chose CSSD, while e.g. 29% of them voted for TOP09.

For ODS, the election is a Pyrrhic victory. It is quite likely that this party will lead the next coalition negotiations and will finally put together a government and choose the next Prime Minister from among its leadership. But there are strong lessons to be learnt as well. Firstly, it cannot rely on its traditional bastions of support. The fact that in Prague, the ODS stronghold, it was ousted by TOP09, came as a huge surprise to many commentators. Many see the corruptions scandals in which the Prague ODS members were implicated as the main reason for the turn away from ODS to other right-wing parties. Also, the party forced its leader, Mirek Topolánek, into resignation over his allegedly politically incorrect remarks when posing for a gay magazine, which threw the party leadership in disarray in the middle of the campaign. Furthermore, ODS is still struggling with its internal identity crisis, being divided into the Eurosceptic and conservative stream, faithful to its founder Vaclav Klaus, and a more pro-European, pragmatic wing represented by former PM Topolánek. The party might need to get rid of some icons, which are associated with previous government and its scandals, release itself from Klaus's legacy and end its internal schizophrenia on European issues. Otherwise it risks being marginalised on the Czech political right, with its place being taken up by TOP09.

Beginners' luck or logical success: TOP09 and the VV

The triumphant outcome for TOP09 is explicable by several factors. The first is the rising discontent of right-wing voters with ODS, making it a viable alternative to vote for. Indisputably, the main catch was putting a charismatic person, Prince Karel Schwarzenberg, former foreign minister and on a long run the most popular Czech politician, in charge of the party leadership and also making him the main icon of the election campaign. Schwarzenberg is widely recognized as a person with high moral standing, reputation abroad and totally clean of any corruption allegations. But it might be a risk as well – as the party does not offer so many new faces, many of its members being renegades from ODS and KDU-CSL.

Although many commentators point out to the fact that Schwarzenberg is the party's face, while its brain is Miroslav Kalousek, former minister of finance and runaway from Christian Democrats. He was also the main construct beyond the party's campaign, focused on swift introduction of austerity measures, reducing structural budget deficit and timely implementation of pension reform. From this perspective, another party's catch was external – it turned the current sovereign debt crisis into the main campaign issue. Mr Kalousek even caused some controversy by sending out fictive bills asking people to cover their proportion on state debt of cca 120.000 crowns (ie about 6000 €) per household member. The measures proposed by TOP09 are extremely strict, even judged so by ODS, who claim that they might have an adverse effect on the fragile economic recovery currently underway.

The relative illegibility of the party (Public Affairs party (VV)) might still complicate future coalition talks, although the party's position on the need to tame public expenses makes it a likely coalition partner for ODS and TOP09, as the economic and financial issues will be the main agenda for the new cabinet.

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The biggest mystery so far is probably the Public Affairs party (VV) of Radek John, a former investigative journalist. It draws its electorate from the generally discontent voters on both the left and the right. Its election programme focuses on many broad issues ranging from fight against corruption to security of citizens. One of the controversial moves was its initiative to establish voluntary citizens' patrols to take care of the security in some residential areas in Prague. Another controversial move was the party leadership's order to all the candidates to sign a declaration that they will always obey to vote in accordance with the position of its parliamentary club (which is clearly unconstitutional and thus not enforceable), as a result of which several prominent candidates pulled out. Another big unknown is who is backing and financing the party (e.g. which entrepreneurs and interest groups). The relative illegibility of the party might still complicate future coalition talks, although the party's position on the need to tame public expenses makes it a likely coalition partner for ODS and TOP09, as the economic and financial issues will be the main agenda for the new cabinet.

Falling out of people's love: the Christian Democrats, the Green Party and the Communists

The failure of Christian Democrats to get into the parliament is a big surprise, given that the party has always been present in the Chamber since 1989 and is assumed to have a relatively stable electorate. The reason is twofold: it shows that the traditional agenda of the party with an emphasis on family and Christian values indeed has limited repercussions among the Czech electorate, especially at the time when more urgent issues need to be tackled. Secondly, the Christian stream is indeed present in other political parties, namely ODS and TOP09. It seems that the runaway voters to TOP09 are exactly that missing critical mass that is eventually responsible for the Christian Democrats' failure to enter the parliament, as it ended up just below the 5% threshold (with 4.6% of votes). The Green Party fared worse than expected, and with only 2.5% of votes stayed even behind two smaller populist parties (the Party of Citizens' Rights of former PM Zeman and Sovereignty of former MEP Bobosikova). This indicates that its relatively good election gain in 2006 was more a result of the party being an alternative to the established ones rather than of a strong identification of the voters with its programme.

The most likely outcome: the "budgetary discipline coalition"

The likely executive outcome is the coalition of ODS, TOP09 and Public Affairs (VV). The ODS leader Petr Necas already engaged in informal negotiations with the other two parties, to create the so-called "coalition of a budgetary discipline". This indeed indicates that the main agenda will be taming the budget deficit and adopting austerity measures, as well as badly needed pension and healthcare reforms. This sends a very positive signal to the financial markets, which will be reflected in strengthening or at least sustaining of the national currency (Czech crown) and will remove doubts about possible downgrading of country's investment rating. Another big agenda will be implementing an anti-corruption strategy, which is becoming by public perceptions a very urgent issue and is likely to be pushed by the new parties – TOP09 and VV. It might lead to some personal changes in ODS, as many of its leading members (particularly at local level) are implicated in corruption scandals and irregularities in public procurement.

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The next move is constitutionally on the President, who will formally have to choose a person entrusted with leading the coalition talks. He would normally ask the leader of the party who won the elections (in this case CSSD). But its leadership is so shaken that at the moment it has hardly any credibility to lead such talks.

How much of a change the 2010 election actually means for the Czech politics still remains to be seen. The outcome gives clearly a green light to the pro-reform agenda and indicates that Czechs at times of crisis can support tough solutions. This particularly applies to the unexpectedly high support for TOP09 who practically promised nothing but austerity measures and handled the "Greek scenario" card very skilfully. It likewise delivered a strong message to the two strongest parties – ODS and CSSD – that the voters are discontent with their work over the past few years. Both parties need to learn their lessons. The Social Democrats badly need to modernise the party and its image, revert from recent populist style of rhetoric, make it relevant to a broader range of middle-income voters, and especially to younger people. The big question remains over the future co-habitation of ODS and TOP09. The programmes of those two parties are strikingly similar, and the only distinguishable feature is TOP09's clearly pro-European stance. Unless ODS quickly sorts out its internal schizophrenia and brings to the forefront new faces, uncompromised by the party's politics till now, it might well happen that TOP09 will oust ODS and degrade it to the position of ever more Eurosceptic and nationalistic right wing conservative party.

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The European Policy Initiative (EuPI) aims at stimulating and assisting new Member States from CEE to develop capacity for constructive co-authorship of common European policies at both government and civil society level. As a new priority area of the European Policies and Civic Participation Program of Open Society Institute – Sofia, EuPI will contribute to improving the capacity of new Member States to effectively impact common European policies through quality research, policy recommendations, networking and advocacy. The initiative operates in the ten new Member States from CEE through a network of experts and policy institutes.

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